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COGNITIVE AND MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IN AGING AND DISENGAGEMENT.

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PREVIOUS THEORIES OF THE AGING PROCESS HAVE DERIVED BEHAVIOR AS NECESSARY FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL OR INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES. AN INTERMEDIATE THEORY, PERSONAL ORIENTATION, ALLOWS THE INDIVIDUAL THE POSSIBILITY OF CHOICE WITHIN HIS CAPACITIES AND SOCIAL SITUATION. THIS THEORY IS BASED ON A DISENGAGEMENT THEORY OF AGING THAT SUGGESTS THAT A PERSON WITHDRAWS SOCIALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY FROM HIS ENVIRONMENT AND THAT THESE PROCESSES ARE INTRINSICALLY DETERMINED. THE PRESENT THEORY CONSIDERS THE INDIVIDUAL'S AWARENESS OF HIS PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL WORLD AND THE RESTRICTION OF LIFE SPACE AND EMOTIONAL DECLINE AS TWO BASICALLY INDEPENDENT PROCESSES OCCURRING OVER THE SAME SPAN OF TIME. SECCESSFUL DISENGAGEMENT IS NOT INTRINSICALLY NECESSARY, BUT AN EQUILIBRIUM CONDITION THAT MOST OF THE POPULATION REACHES. PREVIOUS THEORIES HAVE OVEREMPHASIZED PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF AGING. A METHOD OF SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF SURVEY DATA WILL BE USED FOR EXPLORING THE PROCESSES OF AGING. THIS DOCUMENT IS CHAPTER 18 IN SOCIAL ASPECTS OF AGING, EDITED BY IDA H. SIMPSON AND JOHN C. MCKINNEY, WHICH IS AVAILABLE FROM DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, DURHAM, N.C. (PT)

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18. COGNITIVE AND MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IN AGING AND DISENGAGEMENT

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Many personal characteristics conventionally used in research, such as age, sex, race, and occupational status, may be looked at in two ways: as intrinsic features of the person and as social traits derived from societal prescription. In the case of aging, many physiological and psychological changes have been documented (e.g., cellular deficiencies, diminished reactions, slower reaction time). Many of these changes would seem to cause the aged person to lose contact with the social environment.[1] However, such loss in contact is not an ironclad necessity. More complex tests show a possibility of compensation among older people that may more than counteract many of the primary losses. Older people may make use of their accumulated learning experiences and frequently perform as well as or better than younger persons, if they are willing to engage themselves in the task at hand.[2] On the other hand, looking at aging on a societal level, we know that different societies have different social prescriptions for older persons and varying norms for the various age groupings.[3] In Western society such norm prescriptions fre-

1. Frigyes Verzár, *Lectures on Experimental Gerontology* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1963); Jack Botwinick, "Research Problems and Concepts of the History of Aging," *The Gerontologist*, 4 (September, 1964), 121-129; Alfred Weiss, "Sensory Functions," in J. C. Birren (ed.), *Handbook of Aging and the Individual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 503-542.

2. David Wechsler, *The Measurement of Adult Intelligence* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Co., 1949); A. I. Welford, *Ageing and Human Skills* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

3. Leo H. Simmons, *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945).

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quently include the relinquishing of various functions, especially in work, family relations, and control functions in social institutions. Again, in other instances it is possible that accumulative power during a lifetime may give the aged person an increasing amount of power and involvement within the society. This is true, even in our society, in fields such as politics and finance. Thus, changes due to aging can be seen as the result of natural and socially determined factors mediated by the self-evaluations of the person himself.

Both kinds of theory represent a more or less closed system, deriving behavior as necessary functions of one set of variables—social or individual. Taken to the extreme, each of these theories is vulnerable to attack, especially on empirical grounds, although they may be logically consistent. We shall try to avoid this difficulty by proceeding from an intermediate concept, that of personal orientation. A person does orient himself within the limits given by individual capacities and the social situation, but we accept the possibility of choice at some point, and this may lead to a definite commitment of further orientations.

The present approach stems in part from a current theory which has attempted to develop a personal base for the aging process—namely, disengagement theory.[4] This theory suggests that the aged person recedes socially and psychologically from his environment and that these processes are intrinsically determined. It is not the norms which force the aging person out of the society; the emphasis of the theory is in opposition to the position of aging as a function of societal prescriptions. The personal acceptance of this withdrawal by the aged person would be a correlate of successful aging. However, as far as they are established by younger people, the norms assign productivity a supreme value. Thus, it is difficult for a young person to accept the idea that anyone would want to withdraw from society and lead a more detached, contemplative life.

Disengagement theory has drawn deserved attention to the fact that the so-called losses during the aging process are not necessarily losses from the point of view of the aged person. Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry have succeeded in showing that disengagement is not detrimental and can be accepted as a normal concomi-

4. Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry, *Growing Old* (New York: Basic Books, 1961).

tant of aging. They have some difficulties, however, in showing that disengagement is actually beneficial—for instance, that people who withdraw more are more satisfied with aging.[5] The theory has also been criticized from several other points of view. For example, the theory may be too dependent upon intrinsic conditions, while aging and disengagement may be quite dependent on environmental conditions.[6] Nor has it been demonstrated that intrinsic psychological disengagement is a basic necessity. There is great individual variability in the amount of withdrawal observed in aging. Therefore, withdrawal cannot be said to be a necessary way of acting. These criticisms suggest that disengagement theory has tended, in contrast to the focus on social norms and rejection of the aged, to overemphasize physiological and psychological factors.

However, it is possible to consider social disengagement from the point of view of personal orientations. This would correspond with an early formulation of David Riesman, based on the same study from which disengagement theory later developed. Basing his ideas on an intensive study of aging in Kansas City, Riesman[7] argued against a single, intrinsic process of aging, but he differentiated among three different types of aging which he calls autonomous, conformist, and anomic. The first of these may be held to be roughly parallel to an adjustment gain in old age, the second to maintenance in old age, and the third to a loss in adjustment in old age. From Riesman's point of view, conformity thus facilitates continued adjustment. Conformity to social norms might be seen as corresponding to disengagement. The anomic's adjustment can be viewed as the struggle against accepting the norms of aging, while the autonomous would be the type who does not want to withdraw or detach and succeeds in not doing so.

Implicit in Riesman's formulation is the notion that the person is highly aware of the physical and social world in which he exists. Both the deterioration of bodily capacities and social reinforcement register significantly in the experience of the person. To return to the distinction made in the initial paragraph of this chapter, from the more phenomenal point of view social withdrawal is not a neces-

5. Sheldon S. Tobin and Bernice L. Neugarten, "Life Satisfaction and Social Interaction in the Aging," *Journal of Gerontology*, 16 (1961), 344-346.

6. George L. Maddox, "Disengagement Theory: A Critical Evaluation," *The Gerontologist*, 4 (June, 1964), 80-82.

7. "Some Clinical and Cultural Aspects of the Aging Process," in his *Individualism Reconsidered* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955).

sary result of changes in either the person or his social environment. Rather, withdrawal would seem to depend on the manner in which the person processes the information he receives. It is at this point that the person's orientation to the world comes to play a crucial role, for differences in personal orientation will have a great impact on the processing of information. The person who feels that his days are numbered, for example, will react to information about long-term investments in a much different way than one who feels that all of his life is ahead of him. Based on this emphasis, it is now possible to introduce two important parameters of personal orientation.

A major distinction in the present theoretical orientation corresponds to the long-standing dichotomy between cognitive and motivational factors. In the cognitive domain we can begin with the general notion of *effective life space*. Effective life space can be defined by the extent of the world the person is willing to accept as relevant to his conduct (including any facts about the world—past, present, and future). In general, it can be postulated that effective life space is highly related to age. The world of the child is highly constricted. His attention is largely focused on orienting himself to his immediate environment and familiarizing himself with the continuity of time. Both tasks must be successfully accomplished before the larger world of adolescence and adulthood can be encountered. It is during adolescence that psychological development and social conditions act together to further expand the life space. During early adulthood, a person probably reaches his maximum effective life space. The amount of time which he considers important to his life and the degree of involvement with the world at large become excessive and comparatively fixed. However, different persons vary in size of life space, depending partly on social position, education, and past experiences, and partly on physiological and psychological factors such as attention span, intelligence, and preferred personality dispositions.[8] Gradually, in late middle age, the life space tends to constrict. Physiological changes which limit the person's effective engagement with the world tend to diminish the life space. Accumulated experience may counteract this process to a great degree. Thus, rather than a gradual constriction of the life space, intrinsic physical

8. Kurt W. Back and Kenneth J. Gergen, "Apocalyptic and Serial Time Perspectives and the Structure of Opinions," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, **27** (Fall, 1963), 427-442.

decline may force a sudden onset. This constriction may often occur quite late in life, after, say, sixty or seventy.

The modification of the life space seems to parallel other theories of development for the later ages. For instance, E. H. Erickson's[9] fundamental choices of different stages of life seem to depend on the type of life space under consideration at that time. The profound psycho-social crises which he postulates for the early stages of life relate to self-identity. However, the principal stages of adulthood deal primarily with the person's relationship to society: solidarity vs. isolation in young adulthood, and generativity vs. self-absorption in middle age. The contraction of life space in old age would be paralleled by the choice of integrity vs. despair in old age. Here again it is the emphasis on the person himself which is decisive. The positively valued choice leading to integrity and wisdom merges the boundaries of self and society.

Erickson's dichotomies will also serve as introduction to a second major aspect of development: the emotional investment of the person in his environment. This investment, which corresponds to the energy the person is capable of expending, is perhaps maximal during adolescence and young adulthood, but it would seem to decline gradually and evenly throughout the remainder of life. Emotional decline in aging has been a general assumption of gerontologists, although little direct evidence has been obtained. Empirical evidence is complicated by the fact that changes as measured could be due to restriction of life space as well as to decline of the energy level. Thus, measures of intellectual decline as shown in experiments could be due to lack of involvement of the aged person in the situation as well as to actual intellectual decline.[10] Similarly, the greater neutral response of the older respondents in interviews may be due to lack of interest in the interview or to less feeling about issues.[11] However, some evidence points to emotional withdrawal as such. Studies of verbal behavior have shown less affect in older samples than in younger ones, and projective tests have pointed in the same direction.[12] Even animal experiments have shown less emotion-

9. E. H. Erickson, "Growth and Crises of the Healthy Personality," *Psychological Issues*, 1 (1959), 50-100.

10. Maddox, "Disengagement Theory."

11. Kenneth J. Gergen and Kurt W. Back, "The Disengaged Respondent," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (in preparation).

12. M. J. Lakin and Carl Eisdorfer, "A Study of Affective Expression among the Aged," in Clark Tibbitts and Wilma Donahue (eds.), *Social and Psychological Aspects of Aging* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 650-654.

al behavior in older organisms.[13] A similar distinction to the one made here is formulated by psychiatrists in the field of aging; it is a distinction between recession and regression. At least at one stage the former is purely emotional withdrawal, while the latter includes a host of changes in the adaptive system. Although psychiatrists express doubt about a complete reduction of the drive system, leaving it an open question, ... , too can conceive of differences in cognitive and emotional changes in the life cycle.[14] In their interdisciplinary study of forty-seven aged men, James C. Birren *et al.* find the slowing down of response to be a general function of aging, as opposed to life space changes which depend on specific deprivations.[15]

We consider restriction of the life space and emotional decline as two basically independent processes occurring roughly over the same span of time. These two curves may coincide at certain points. Equilibrium or disequilibrium may occur if the effective life space exceeds energy level or vise versa. Further, different conditions in adulthood might affect both the time and kind of decline of the life space and the energy level, and therefore they might not necessarily allow disengagement to be a possible condition of aging. Thus, we view successful disengagement as not being something that is intrinsically necessary, but rather as an equilibrium condition which a great part of the population may reach. It would seem that the process of disengagement, seen as the interaction of two variables, is least efficiently studied in case studies with small numbers. A more appropriate approach would seem to be the use of a large number of subjects representing a variety of population groups. We shall show that some changes due to aging are more easily comprehended if they are related to one condition or the other and that some depend on the relationship between the two.

In the following pages, we shall use a method which seems to us particularly adaptable to exploring the processes of aging. This is the method of secondary analysis of survey data. Here it is possible to analyze the responses of a great number of people from all population groups and ages on a great variety of topics. The use of

13. Jack Werboff and Joan Havlena, "Effects of Aging on Open Field Behavior," *Psychological Reports*, **10** (1962), 395-398.

14. M. E. Linden, "Regression and Recession in the Psychology of the Aging," in N. E. Zinberg and Irving Kaufman (eds.), *Normal Psychology of the Aging Process* (New York: International Universities Press, 1963), pp. 125-142.

15. James C. Birren, Robert W. Butler, Samuel W. Greenhouse, Louis Sokoloff, and Marion R. Yarrow (eds.), *Human Aging* (Public Health Service Publication No. 986 [Bethesda, Md.: 1963]).

large (1,600 or larger) samples and the possibility of using several independent surveys help in applying a general theory such as the one proposed in these pages. The variety of questions used and different historical contexts give us confidence that no trick of question design or immediate circumstances account for differences between the different age groups. The data have been collected over a twenty-year span and thus cannot be interpreted in terms of intergenerational differences. On the other hand, the data have the drawback of having been collected for different purposes, where the variables we are investigating were of secondary interest or even possible sources of error to the original investigator. In many instances the kind of interpretation which we are giving to a question was only tangentially intended in the questionnaire, and thus the actual relationships may be quite small. Here again the replication in several different studies under different conditions can compensate for indirect evidence obtained in each case. For the same reason, the total pattern of relationships will be the main point of interest, and significance tests will be omitted.

The three chapters which follow represent an attempt to expand on the foregoing and to demonstrate the utility of considering cognitive and motivational factors in aging for several highly disparate topics. Chapter 19 further develops the notion of equilibrium and includes data on morale and psychological well-being. In Chapter 20, both cognitive and motivational factors are considered together and related to bodily care and concern. Chapter 21 dwells more intensively on the concept of life space and shows its relation to attitudes toward international conflict. The data presented in the following chapters can hardly be said to validate the present theoretical notions to the exclusion of all others. However, the major strength of the arguments would seem to be their capacity to unify and interrelate highly diverse areas of study.

Our whole procedure will be as follows. The implications of the theory sketched here will be applied to the topics under consideration—morale, somatic concern, and attitude toward international concerns—and compared with approaches which others have used to study these topics. Then a number of surveys will be scanned for relevant items, and the answers to them will be analyzed by age (mainly in three age groups: under forty, forty to fifty-nine, sixty and over). Consistent trends in these diverse questions will then be discussed.

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